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Mary McCullough

Loyola Marymount University, mary.mccullough@lmu.edu

Violet Wright

Loyola Marymount University, vwright6@lion.lmu.edu

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The Generations Defined Through a U.S. Lens Chart

Mary K. McCullough, Ph.D. and Violet Wright

Abstract

Diversity in the workplace is an opportunity for learning and growth. One lens of diversity for leaders and organizations to consider is generational diversity, as now five generations comprise the U.S. workforce. Understanding the backgrounds of generational cohorts helps organizations create inclusive environments and address one aspect of intersectionality. Definitions of generational cohorts are not intended to stereotype individuals or groups. The Generations Defined Through a U.S. Lens Chart was developed over the past 14 years from a review of research and input from members of different generations. The Chart outlines both domestic and global influences impacting five generations: Veterans, Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. The Chart also describes major characteristics for each generation including work and leadership preferences, as well as motivation in the workplace. The authors, one Boomer and one Gen Z, built on earlier versions of the Chart to include current research, expanded influences, and validate the content from experience. The goal of the Chart is to assist organizations in creating a workplace to celebrate and engage generational diversity.

The Generations Defined Through a U.S. Lens*

| Generation Names | Veterans | Baby Boomers | Generation X | Generation Y/Millennials | Generation Z |
|--|--|--|---|--|--|
| Birth Years** <i>(Approximate)</i> | 1928 - 1945 | 1946 - 1964 | 1965 - 1980 | 1981 - 1996 | 1997 - 2010 |
| Population Size <i>(Approximate)</i> | 19.1 million | 71 million | 45.2 million | 72.1 million | 68 million |
| Nicknames | "The Silent Generation" "Traditionalists" | "Boomers" | "Xers" "Sandwich Generation" "Lost Generation" | "Millennials" "Gen Y" "Nexters" "Gen We" | "Gen Z" "iGen" "Plurals" |
| Domestic Influences <i>(That inform my generation)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great Depression • Women employed outside of the home • Harlem Renaissance • Prohibition continues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consequential judicial rulings (<i>Mendez v. Westminster; Brown v. Board of Education</i>) • Civil Rights Movement (Passage of Civil Rights Act) • President John F. Kennedy assassinated • Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. assassinated • "Hippie" Movement (Woodstock) • First Polio vaccine | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watergate • AIDS Epidemic and rise of LGBTQIA+ rights • Apollo 11 moon landing • Roe v. Wade • Rise of computing devices • Invisibility between two large generations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A Nation at Risk</i> • Oklahoma City Bombing • Challenger Space Shuttle disaster • Columbine Shooting • Mass production of hybrid cars • Rise of the Internet/social media boom • Gulf War • Iraq War • LA Riots | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9/11 and the War on Terror • Gun violence and mass shootings • <i>No Child Left Behind</i> • Iraq War • Great Recession • Barack Obama elected first Black President of the U.S. • U.S. government pandemic response • Black Lives Matter and anti-racism movement |
| Global Influences <i>(That inform my generation)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World War II • Birth of international organizations (e.g., United Nations, World Bank) • Post-War scientific advancements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-World War II • Space Race (USSR launched Sputnik) • Cold War • Vietnam War • Nuclear arms race • Enduring communist/democratic debate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End of Cold War (fall of the Berlin Wall) • Nelson Mandela elected President (ending apartheid rule in South Africa) • Globalization, liberalization, and economic growth in developing countries • Tianamen Square protests | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traction in nuclear programs (Iran, North Korea) • Rise in number of worldwide democracies • Escalation of global health events (SARS, H1N1) • Broad-scope use of internet | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceleration of social media and artificial intelligence • Global financial crisis • Rise in nationalistic leaders/governments • Climate crisis • Continual "nuclear armageddon" in the news |
| Major Characteristics <i>(I am...)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependable and loyal • Very civic-minded • Traditional in beliefs, in respect to authority, family togetherness, and "American values" • Looking for new ways to enjoy life in the "golden years" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly optimistic, idealistic, and a strong work ethic • Defined by my work: "live to work" • Passionate, spirited, and collaborative • Driven toward personal gratification • Traditional media consumer (television, radio, magazines, etc.) • Favor in-person services (banking, voting, etc.) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly self-reliant • Highly technologically competent • Seeks balance between life and work • Informal in interactions • Seeks a sense of family in the workplace • Generally skeptical of institutions and disloyal if expectations are not met • Digitally savvy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly optimistic, competitive, and hopeful about the future and possible successes/fame • Extremely technologically competent and dependent • Generally skeptical of institutions and sometimes disloyal • Prone to utilizing new-age media: streaming services (e.g. Netflix), use of mobile devices, gravitates toward online purchasing, has multiple social media accounts • Defined by work-life balance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realistic and practical • Politically active and civic minded • Proud of who we are • "Working to live not living to work" • Creative and inclusive when designing discourse for future global influence • Have grown up in a hyper-connected world • Entrepreneurial • Most racially diverse |
| Ideal Work Environment <i>(I seek a workplace that...)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides stability, formality, and structure • Values respect for my knowledge and experience from younger employees • Values personal interactions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offers positions of leadership and mentorship • Affords stability and values loyalty in the workplace • Highlights and respects my work • Emphasizes team oriented work • Sets specific goals and strategic plans | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Values diversity • Offers nontraditional concepts of time and space • Promotes work-life balance • Provides a fun, informal environment • Allows me to work independently and in solitude if need be • Does not engage in micromanagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides nontraditional concepts of time and space • Does not place value on loyalty • Offers instant incentives to maintain my motivation • Uses technology in all aspects of work • Values collaboration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborates in a small group setting • Places value on purpose, honesty, and job security • Prioritizes social responsibility and diversity • Prioritizes social-emotional needs • Provides opportunities for growth and creativity • Incorporates cutting edge technology |

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| Generation Names | Veterans | Baby Boomers | Generation X | Generation Y/Millennials | Generation Z |
|---|--|---|---|---|--|
| Support Systems <i>(I need a leader who...)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows me to contribute in my own way Encourages mentorship Asks me to lead and facilitate teams Recognizes my expertise as an in-house consultant Is willing to negotiate part-time work schedules Personalizes the workplace through the use of newsletters and bulletin boards for family photos | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides an outlet for personal expression Appeals to individualism Finds out what I do best and values my individual talents Trusts me and in whom I can trust Allows me options for: flexible hours, telecommuting, four-day work week, etc. Encourages team work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appreciates my achievements through positive and individual feedback Does not enforce long hours or engage in office politics Is honest and transparent about their expectations of me Engages in open, honest communication Is willing to answer me when I ask "why" Wants to build relationships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offers short term assignments that are not routine Offers training and career advancement Assists me along--the way because I learn while doing Takes into consideration wellness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides the outlet to think of creative solutions Incorporates technology Promotes equality and diversity Takes initiative in assigning tasks and addressing conflict Offers frequent and clear communication Lets me explore what I am passionate about Encourages my development and supports mentoring |
| Incentives <i>(I will work harder for...)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time off to spend with family Flexible time to spend on: my leisure activities, partnerships with non-profits and volunteer activities, sabbaticals to build hobbies or pursue self-fulfillment The ability to "sample retirement" while maintaining my right to return to work Traditional family events that include grandchildren Benefit plans for returning to work part-time | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The chance to lead a project or venture Problem-solving responsibilities Material rewards: first class plane tickets, luxury hotels, etc. Extra vacation days Cafeteria-style benefits Flexible work schedules and locations More stability, less travel Personal fulfillment in my career Time off for exploration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weekends and evenings free A workplace that values my quality of life Incentives I design Fun if I have to stay late Autonomy Flex time--just get the job done Casual dress options Extra vacation as a reward Family leave programs to care for aging parents and/or children Compensation: ability to build savings, pay off student loan debt, etc. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time off to enjoy the things I really enjoy Immediate success Team work especially at critical times Basic needs (food, childcare) Personal thank you's and recognition Compensation: ability to build savings, pay off student loan debt, etc. The opportunity to be rich and famous | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to foster a more equitable work environment (benefits, unionization, etc.) The opportunity to implement creative solutions The ability to explore what I am passionate about Time to spend with family and friends The chance to work overtime every once in a while Flexibile hours Compensation: wants to prevent financial struggles as experienced by parents and clear student debt |
| Motivations <i>(I am motivated by...)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work that is arranged around my extra-curricular activities Recognition for my high level of loyalty and my long term value add Assistance in easing into retirement Opportunities for retirees to help other retirees | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The challenge of the "best way to solve the problem" Having my ideas and suggestions valued and by rewards for finding flaws in the current system Being consulted in decision-making Creating teams to do innovate things Selecting my own training workshops and courses Retirement considerations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning many different jobs to build my marketable skills Looking for bigger and better opportunities/paychecks Building coalitions Any workplace that provides me with the best possible rewards and will move often to find it | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time to explore new jobs or assignments Pay for performance-advancement not based on seniority Meaningful work that contributes to a goal (especially societal goal) Responsibility for achieving lofty goals Designing my own work environment (no cubicles) Internet use flexibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice The chance for growth and personal development in a company Work that is making a larger impact on society The ability to think critically and engage in creative solutions |

*The newest generation, **Generation Alpha**, comprises 48 million individuals born between the years of 2011 and 2024. Nicknamed “Gen Alpha,” “Mini Millennials,” and “The Glass Generation,” this generation is affected on a domestic level by school shootings, the United States’ pandemic policy response, Black Lives Matter and anti-racism movements, and the Trump presidency. Globally, they are influenced by the ongoing climate crisis, war in Ukraine, the British exit from the European Union (Brexit), and COVID-19 pandemic. This group is digitally native, and as they grow, will favor online schooling, financing, communicating, and socializing. They will evolve into the most highly educated and diverse generation yet.

**Birth years vary by source.

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